

Message

From: Shams, Dahnish [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=B7037E39BB6341C8850BCDC61BF9D65A-SHAMS, DAHN]
Sent: 7/12/2012 7:12:10 PM
To: Kadry, Abdel-Razak [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=acb325507bf7451b9735813cfde5e417-Kadry, Abdel-Razak]; Sasso, Alan [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8cb867519abc4dcea88149d12ef3e8e9-Sasso, Alan]; Allan Marcus [Marcus.AllanLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Davis, Allen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=a8ecee8c29c54092b969e9547ea72596-Davis, Allen]; Boone, Amanda [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=304ccd01957044a1bd50a366d1cd76d4-Boone, Amanda]; Persad, Amanda [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=fd13fdf1bd814755baac109c2ab990a0-Persad, Amanda]; AmandaM Evans [Evans.AmandaMLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Hotchkiss, Andrew [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=10f01ccc8611401bb34d16b71a87d3d5-Hotchkiss, Andrew]; Kraft, Andrew [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4a94a4f199b247778abb02285a51b927-Kraft, Andrew]; Anne Grambsch [Grambsch.AnneLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Gatchett, Annette [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=f12d699a71f84e21bddbb876dae7f96c-Gatchett, Annette]; Jarabek, Annie [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8b1de54d48e1429c8129f6499211dbdb-Jarabek, Annie]; Luke, April [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=b98bf69c14b142d3ac8e0e9132ee36ed-Luke, April]; Galizia, Audrey [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=b9b75d310aba41448cef769d77486e7c-Galizia, Audrey]; Buckley, Barbara [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4bb6dedc12624295b9e8e5f835a1f166-Buckley, Barbara]; Glenn, Barbara [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=7a2dc9210d2d4d02a623b33f87f49436-Glenn, Barbara]; Barbara Wright [Wright.BarbaraLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Clark, Becki [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=a906e07f1cd143b9a3c2ddab813b8140-Clark, Becki]; Hawkins, Belinda [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=075561d171e845828ec67a945663a8e6-Hawkins, Belinda]; Zwyer, Bette [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=79830e38edb14034b7e47e29ed213dab-Zwyer, Bette]; Bob Frederick [Frederick.BobLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Bob Sonawane [Sonawane.BobLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Brenda Carmichael [Carmichael.BrendaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; chonshoaf@gmail.com; Gibbons, Catherine [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=2ac775a35a0945718edc7e02f50e6c12-Gibbons, Catherine]; Charles Ris [Ris.CharlesLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Brinkerhoff, Chris [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8d96248a62bd42db9a6cd12e5adedaa5-Brinkerhoff, Chris]; Cubbison, Christopher [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=e1b702ba5f394a15a49c5efad199035a-Cubbison, Christopher]; Christina Bonanni [Bonanni.ChristinaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Parsons, Christy [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=bf0dabe0c058478294128cb3f842573d-Powers, Christina]; Cai, Christine [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8e5901665d14498983704fd9eeda0dd8-Cai, Christine]; Christine Ross [Ross.ChristineLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Christopher Sheth [Sheth.ChristopherLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; CN=Connie Kang/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Shams, Dahnish [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=b7037e39bb6341c8850bcd61bf9d65a-Shams, Dahn]; Petersen, Dan [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=05e14a620a164436adfae701533b4cd5-Petersen, Dan]; Moore, Danielle [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=979ea3cb9c2f4da4ac701d93cb24c17d-Moore, Danielle]; Winner, Darrell [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group

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(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=cf26b876393e44f38bdd06db02dbbfe5-Bussard, David]; Segal, Deborah [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=bcdd984267644f3fb89ea65f65e6f422-Segal, Deborah]; Debra Walsh [Walsh.DebraLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Hutchins, Debra [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=38b89ba9317a475ca671ae9fe840e00d-Jones, DebraL]; Shaw, Denise [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=556182b3879649039b11d36e5e09d9aa-Shaw, Denise]; CN=Doug Johns/OU=RTP/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Corona, Elizabeth [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=18d86fb8269b4557b5d06622b3a941af-Corona, Elizabeth]; Elizabeth Erwin [Erwin.ElizabethLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Eva McLanahan [McLanahan.EvaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Lehmann, Geniece [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=949a2f9c9f9f484581c3d00b118193e6-Lehmann, Geniece]; Woodall, George [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
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(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=86ff3a58b76b40e4a75d9441bd584153-Suter, Glenn]; Harlal Choudhury [choudhury.harlalLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; CN=Helen Knecht/OU=CI/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Hui-Min Yang [Yang.Hui-MinLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Ila Cote [Cote.IlaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Avery, James [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=b0fc9e70467647709fa9377dfb987f10-Avery, James]; James Ball [Ball.JamesLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Strong, Jamie [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=ea753aafefb74c268550fe6a2c187838-Benedict, Jamie]; Gamble, Janet [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
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(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=e3743bd6f3c345baaae407c1d6f78e92-FRITHSEN, JEFF]; Jennifer Jinot [Jinot.JenniferLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Vandenberg, John [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=dcae2b98a04540fb8d099f9d4dead690-Vandenberg, John]; Reid, Jon [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
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(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=d8d90ca09c2744f080d333034ee08fe7-Kaiser, Jonathan]; CN=Jordan Trecki/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Karen Hammerstrom [Hammerstrom.KarenLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Hogan, Karen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=eb7dc31713d443f0a322f0163d8d7c73-Hogan, Karen]; Kate Guyton [Guyton.KateLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Deener, Kathleen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=b9a2ff1c086249ea8f6414afde8a5e54-Deener, Kathleen]; Newhouse, Kathleen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
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(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4fd610df1d0c4db0b97eb0e00231461e-Salazar, Keith]; Kelly Serfling [Serfling.KellyLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Kenneth Olden [Olden.KennethLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Krista Christensen [Christensen.KristaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Alexander, Laurie [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=1b0c420c5c71464b922e50788a1c22de-Alexander, Laurie]; Kopylev, Leonid [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group
(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=abfe6798809e4c8c8a27452ec86726d8-Kopylev, Leonid]; Lisa Vinikoor-Imler [Vinikoor-Imler.LisaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; D'Amico, Louis [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=78a91f83c4414910be286efe02004dbc-D'Amico, Louis J.]; Lucy Curtis [Curtis.LucyLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Flowers, Lynn [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group

(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=1a4411c874d041b9a8badfc32b91bd70-Flowers, Lynn]; CN=Madalene Stevens/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Field, Malcolm [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8d12938447d14c7babcf431d75d745f6-Field, Malcolm]; Pratt, Margaret [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=8eda90b62a874c7ea9d857903ac1fd14-Pratt, Margaret]; Maria Spassova [Spassova.Maria@epa.gov]; Marian Rutigliano [Rutigliano.MarianLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Martin Gehlhaus [Gehlhaus.MartinLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Ross, Mary [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=98359cd1f66f46ec91d327e99a3c6909-Ross, Mary]; Gwinn, Maureen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4bdc5237a5c440a7b664518e23eb5647-Gwinn, Maureen]; Johnson, Maureen [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=bcd265492be044379eafedd1fb0cff1e-Johnson, Maureen]; Michael Slimak [Slimak.MichaelLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Troyer, Michael [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=847b0020dd0e457e85f994a1ad64b26d-Troyer, Michael]; Wright, Michael [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=0087b3fe163145869deead8b626fbfa3-Wright, Michael]; Keshava, Nagalakshmi [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=d125c2980ab348ec828ba8f513b95049-Keshava, Nagalakshmi]; Nina Wang [Wang.NinaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Birchfield, Norman [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=c910f2fd28414e819b6afe6dda525e9f-Birchfield, Norman]; CN=Patricia Gillespie/OU=RTP/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Murphy, Patricia [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4e02a7540f8042fda07eed1248addaf7-Murphy, Patricia]; Schlosser, Paul [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=121cf759d94e4f08afde0ceb646e711b-Schlosser, Paul]; White, Paul [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4e179825823c44ebbb07a9704e1e5d16-White, Paul]; Peter Preuss [Preuss.PeterLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Sams, Reeder [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=7d5b479ccd894cea99ae55df20de6971-Sams, Reeder]; Jones, Samantha [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=eac77fe3b20c4667b8c534c90c15a830-Jones, Samantha]; CN=Samantha Walker/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Barone, Stan [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=a4f8618acbba418da24c110f3123a2af-Barone, Stan]; Stella Spyropoulos [Spyropoulos.StellaLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Vulimiri, Suryanarayana [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=1a4f972302434ec6a04b015b14845a9d-Vulimiri, Suryanarayana]; Makris, Susan [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=7654051d8d1240a39dfa9463c9b0b7e5-Makris, Susan]; Rieth, Susan [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=00aac63cc995489188b8a449aaa18f5e-Rieth, Susan]; CN=Suzanne Martos/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA; Berner, Ted [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=f1949c9653024d3cb4aa4c2bd69c4fde-Berner, Ted]; Teneille Walker [Walker.TeneilleLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Bateson, Thomas [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=29bfdde020bf4e93b431b9a72d9d230f-Bateson, Thomas]; Blessinger, Todd [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=f5240ca690c84f8fb20bac6fd7273fd5-Blessinger, Todd]; Long, Tom [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=7526c52b77aa4516b9ac197536e5a6a0-Long, Tom]; Cogliano, Vincent [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=51f2736376ac4d32bad2fe7cfef2886b-Cogliano, Vincent]; Weihsueh Chiu [Chiu.WeihsuehLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Sanchez, Yolanda [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=473c34ae73994a4a8acafe6f03e0baeb-Sanchez, Yolanda]

Subject: NEWS UPDATE: EPA, CDC officials testify to Senate on child lead poisoning (USA TODAY)

EPA, CDC officials testify to Senate on child lead poisoning

By Alison Young, USA TODAY

(<http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/story/2012-07-12/lead-poisoning-hearing/56171956/1>)

WASHINGTON - A U.S. senator questioned federal environmental health officials at a hearing Thursday about what is being done to address lead poisoning risks posed by contaminated soil around hundreds of old lead factory sites featured in a recent USA TODAY investigation.

"Generations of children are growing up playing in the shadow of these lead smelting plants," said U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J. "Throughout the nation, the USA TODAY report shows lead contamination has had a devastating impact ... it's obvious we could help fix this problem if the EPA had the resources to fully test and clean up" the sites.

Lautenberg's comments came during a hearing before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on the latest science on the effects lead has on children's bodies.

The studies show that even small exposures are associated with measurable reductions in IQ, increased incidence of attention disorders and other health problems in children, members were told by scientists from the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"No safe blood lead level for children has been identified," Christopher Portier, director of the CDC's environmental health center, testified.

Children can be exposed to lead from a variety of sources. While lead-based paint is the best-known source, a USA TODAY investigation earlier this year revealed the danger posed by lead-contaminated soil around forgotten factory sites that spewed lead particles into neighborhoods for decades before closing in the 1960s or 1970s. Other sources of exposure include soil contaminated from years of leaded gasoline emissions. Children can ingest lead particles by putting dusty toys or hands in their mouths.

John Vandenberg, an EPA official whose division evaluates scientific research, testified that human exposures to lead involve multiple sources, "including hand to mouth contact or inhalation of lead dust, eating peeling paint chips, drinking water conveyed through lead pipes, and exposure to soil, which can act as a reservoir for deposited lead emissions."

Portier told the committee the No. 1 source of exposure for young children is lead-based paint in homes.

The CDC in May announced that for the first time in 20 years it was changing the federal definition of lead poisoning, reducing by half the amount of lead in a child's body that should trigger protective actions by parents and health officials.

The CDC estimates that more than 500,000 U.S. children ages 1-5 have blood-lead levels above the new standard, which is 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. About 150,000 children are estimated to have lead levels above the old standard of 10.

During the hearing, Lautenberg expressed concern about a former smelter site in Carteret, N.J., featured in USA TODAY's "Ghost Factories" series, which he called a "sobering report that puts this crisis in perspective."

"A lead smelting plant spewed toxic materials throughout the neighborhood," he said, yet only the factory's property was cleaned up after it closed decades ago - not any of the yards of people living in a nearby neighborhood. USA TODAY's tests found dangerous levels of lead contamination remain in neighborhood soils.

"It means over multiple administrations of both parties we've failed to protect these families whose lives and futures hang in the balance," Lautenberg said, noting that the Carteret site was just one of more than 230 forgotten factories nationwide identified by the newspaper's investigation that may pose a threat to residents.

Lautenberg asked what the EPA can do to address the contamination in such neighborhoods.

Vandenberg said the EPA takes the issues seriously. "I can say EPA is aware of these issues and our discussions are ongoing."

When the CDC lowered its definition of lead poisoning in May, dramatically increasing the number of U.S. children needing action to protect them from continued lead exposure, the agency said in a statement that it will be difficult to take some actions its scientific advisory panel recommended to protect lead-exposed children because the CDC lacks the funding and staff.

"A commitment to implement actions cannot be made due to our lack of control over available resources," the agency said in a statement issued in May.

Congress nearly eliminated CDC funding for lead-poisoning prevention this year, cutting the program from \$29 million in fiscal year 2011 to \$2 million. Most of the money is sent by the CDC to local health departments, which use it to investigate poisoning cases and take other actions to protect children. The CDC is reducing staff in its Lead Poisoning Prevention Program from 26 to six full-time employees.

In June, the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to restore some of the CDC's lead funding - upping it to \$10 million in fiscal year 2013. A House version of the bill that includes CDC funding is pending.

"Unfortunately, just as the federal government acknowledges more children are at risk, the 2013 budget proposal effectively cuts funding," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who chaired Thursday's environment committee hearing.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., noted that no Republican members of the environment committee attended Thursday's lead poisoning science hearing. "It's unfortunate we don't seem to have any participation from the Republican side," he said.

Staff for Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the committee's ranking Republican, distributed a written statement that said today's hearing was about "one of the things I think all members of Congress agree on: lead exposure in children is harmful." The statement expressed concern that efforts to reduce blood-lead levels "must be based on a scientific approach and not precautionary paranoia" and called for greater scrutiny of the EPA's new lead renovation and painting rules.

Health advocates said they hoped today's hearing would increase awareness by members of Congress that lead poisoning is not an old issue.

"I hope there will be a bipartisan understanding and appreciation of the ongoing impact of childhood lead poisoning," said Rebecca Morley, executive director of the National Center for Healthy Housing.

"This is a terrible time to be scaling back on lead support," Maryland's health secretary, Joshua Sharfstein, said in an interview this week. Sharfstein said state health officials have been sending out letters to health providers advising them of the new CDC guidance on children's blood-lead levels. They're trying to determine how best to manage the cases of children who may not have received any outreach because their blood was tested before the CDC lowered its action level.

"We want to do everything we can to help these kids with low-level lead exposure," Sharfstein said. "We're trying to figure out with the resources we have what the best approach is."

In Wisconsin, where CDC funding is likely to run out in September, some lead prevention staff have left for more secure jobs and positions have been left vacant, said Henry Anderson, state health officer at the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

"For us, getting replacement funding takes time," Anderson said in an interview, noting the state has a biennial budget that won't be revisited until next summer. He said the department is trying to figure out how to use the money it has most effectively, which may mean doing fewer home inspections or less comprehensive investigations of how individual children are being poisoned, and scaling back information outreach programs to families and physicians.

Dahnish Shams
National Center for Environmental Assessment Intern
Office of Research and Development
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Work: (703) 347-0357